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SUBJECT: CIVIL SOCIETY GROUP EXPRESSES CONCERN ABOUT HUMAN
RIGHTS IN VAVUNIYA AND HUMANITARIAN IMPLICATIONS

¶1. (SBU) Summary: A Sri Lankan Civil Society Group that traveled to Vavuniya September 11 and 12 to assess conditions for establishing a humanitarian hub for internally displaced persons (IDPs) from the north, reported to Colombo-based diplomats that an increasing number of abductions, disappearances, as well as wide-spread extortion in Vavuniya are likely to further discourage IDPs from moving south. UN Resident Representative Buhne reported that the departure of UN staff from Kilinochchi on September 16 prompted virtually all of the town's 40,000 inhabitants to begin moving north in anticipation of the onset of hostilities. He reported that the UN is negotiating with the government to allow UN staff to accompany WFP convoys into the north and monitor the distribution of this relief. He said discussions were also underway about the creation of a possible safe area in the north. Diplomats agreed Colombo Ambassadors should coordinate staggered visits to Vavuniya to encourage human rights improvements there. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) The U.S. Embassy hosted a briefing for diplomats on September 17 to hear a report from a Sri Lankan civil society team that traveled to Vavuniya on September 11 and 12 to assess conditions there. Ambassadors and representatives from the Embassies of Norway, France, Australia, Switzerland, Canada, Japan, and the EU and well as the UN Representative attended. The team was led by Pakiasothy Saravanamuttu, the well regarded Executive Director of the Center for Policy Alternatives in Colombo. The team plans to request a meeting with the President to present their findings, before issuing a public report in the next several days.

Background

¶3. (SBU) Vavuniya, a district headquarters, is the last sizeable town in government-controlled territory on the A-9 highway before the crossing point at Omanthai. It is an important logistical point for the Sri Lankan security forces. It also straddles Sri Lanka's ethnic divide with Sinhalese-dominated communities to the south but a Tamil majority in Vavuniya and northwards.

Deteriorating Human Rights Situation in Vavuniya

14. (SBU) The civil society group reported that they had spoken with a number of civil society, church and other sources in Vavuniya. All stated their concerns about the increasing number of human rights violations in Vavuniya as well as an increase in child recruitment by paramilitary groups. The group reported that Vavuniya has the highest concentration of paramilitary groups in the country including representatives from TELO, PLOTE, TMVP, EPDP and possibly others. They indicated that in August alone 19 people were abducted in front of other witnesses, while an additional 24 went missing. The group also reported an unusually high incidence of torture, particularly among women, apparently as a tactic to prevent residents either from joining the LTTE or providing information to them. Extortion also is rampant with many requests coming by phone from several specific telephone numbers. The group alleged that there likely is at least tacit government awareness of these abductions since many take place near or between check points manned by government security forces. The group summarized the situation by saying that the population of Vavuniya is scared to talk and that the high levels of human rights violations are likely to discourage IDPs in the north from moving south to camps that will be set up for them by the Government near Vavuniya.

Group Doubts IDPs Will Move South

15. (SBU) Based on their conversations with INGOs and other people who have recently come from LTTE-controlled areas, the group expressed doubt that IDPs would move south into

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government-controlled areas and stated their concerns about a possible humanitarian "disaster" in the north. They said most non-governmental observers in Vavuniya believe the LTTE will do its best to prevent IDPs from moving south, while the IDPs fear the government camps will be little more than detention centers. In addition, the fact that Tamils have effectively been detained in IDP camps for extended periods of time does not engender confidence in the Government's intent. The group urged the diplomats to: a) pressure the government to allow the World Food Program to accompany food convoys to the north, and improve the human rights situation in Vavuniya; (b) encourage GSL to allow freedom of movement for IDPs currently detained; and (c) pressure both the LTTE and the government to create safe spaces in the north where IDPs will not be subject to shelling and can access relief. Kilinochchi Vacated

16. (SBU) UN Resident Representative Buhne told the group that the UN had been able to evacuate its personnel from Kilinochchi on September 16. He reported that the departure of UN staff prompted virtually all 40,000 inhabitants of Kilinochchi to move north anticipating the onset of hostilities in the city. He reported that the UN is negotiating with the government to allow UN staff to accompany WFP convoys into the north and monitor the distribution of this relief. He said discussions were also underway about the creation of a possible safe area in the north. He cautioned that UN staff with long experience in Sri Lanka noted the mixed record of safe areas during fighting in the period between 1995 and 2001.

17. (SBU) The Swiss Ambassador reported that she and her Canadian colleague plan to visit Vavuniya on September 28. Ambassador commented that given the serious human rights problem in Vavuniya and its importance as a new hub for humanitarian relief it would be wise for other Ambassadors to plan regular bi-weekly visits to assess conditions on the ground and to keep the pressure on the government to improve conditions for human rights and for receiving the IDPs. Everyone agreed. All Ambassadors reassured the civil society representatives that diplomats will remain actively engaged to seek improvements in the human rights situation in

Vavuniya and avert a humanitarian crisis for the IDPs in the north.

Comment

18. (SBU) Embassy has already raised on numerous occasions with the Government our concerns about human rights abuses in Vavuniya, which has been a focus of conflict-related violations by both sides during several phases of Sri Lanka's ethnic struggle. This group's report highlights not only the deterioration of human rights, but also sheds light for the first time on possible child recruitment in that area. Embassy will follow up with UNICEF and arrange our own visit in coordination with other missions to assess first hand conditions in Vavuniya.

BLAKE